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AUTHOR	Lumsden, Linda
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ABSTRACT

Students who are the target of bullying episodes commonly suffer serious, long-term academic, physical, and emotional consequences. Unfortunately, school personnel often minimize, underestimate, tolerate, or ignore the extent of bullying and the harm it can cause. This digest examines the problem of bullying and some of its effects, and discusses preventive steps schools and states are taking. Bullying occurs when a person willfully and repeatedly exercises power over another with hostile or malicious intent. It can be physical or psychological in form. In a survey of more than 15,000 sixth through tenth graders, 30 percent reported bullying others, being targets, or both. Everyday approximately 160,000 students stay home from school out of fear of being bullied. Victims often have difficulty concentrating on schoolwork, show low performance, and have relatively high rates of absenteeism. Psychological symptoms of victims include anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. To counteract bullying, schools can distribute a written anti-bullying policy to everyone in the school community and apply the policy consistently and fairly. Positive socialization and anger-management skills can be taught. An anti-bullying culture can be developed among peers. Some states are beginning to require schools to adopt anti-bullying policies. (Contains 17 references.) (RT)

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Preventing Bullying

By Linda Lumsden

School is supposed to be a place where students feel safe and secure and where they can count on being treated with respect. The reality, however, is that a significant number of students are the target of bullying episodes that result in serious, long-term academic, physical, and emotional consequences. Unfortunately, school personnel often minimize or underestimate the extent of bullying and the harm it can cause. In many cases, bullying is tolerated or ignored (Barone 1997; Colvin and others 1998).

When teachers and administrators fail to intervene, some victims ultimately take things into their own hands, often with grievous results. In its recent analysis of 37 school shooting incidents, the U.S. Secret Service learned that a majority of the shooters had suffered "bullying and harassment that was longstanding and severe" (U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center 2000).

This Digest examines the problem of bullying and some of its effects, discusses steps schools are taking, looks at ways peers can discourage bullying, and identifies other strategies that are being pursued.

What Is Bullying and How Prevalent Is the Problem?

Bullying occurs when a person willfully and repeatedly exercises power over another with hostile or malicious intent. A wide range of physical or verbal behaviors of an aggressive or antisocial nature are encompassed by the term *bullying*. These include "insulting, teasing, abusing verbally and physically, threatening, humiliating, harassing, and mobbing" (Colvin and others). Bullying may also assume less direct forms (sometimes referred to as "psychological bullying") such as gossiping, spreading rumors, and shunning or exclusion (O'Connell and others 1999).

In a recent survey of more than 15,000 sixth- through tenth-graders at public and private schools in the U.S., "30 percent of the students reported bullying others, being the target of bullies, or both" (Bowman 2001). The information, gathered in 1998 as part of the World Health Organization's Health Behavior in School-Aged Children Survey and released in April 2001, is "the first nationally representative research on the frequency of bullying among students in the United States" (Bowman).

Although the World Health Organization's survey queried only students in grades 6 through 10, younger students are also victims of bullying. In a study of fourth- through eighth-graders, about 15 percent reported being severely distressed by bullying and 22 percent reported academic difficulties stemming from mistreatment by peers (Hoover and Oliver 1996).

In an average elementary school classroom, two or three students are consistently afraid while at school (Garrity and others 1996). Many avoid public areas of the school such as the cafeteria and restrooms in an attempt to elude bullies. For some students, the fear is so great that they avoid school altogether. Every day approximately 160,000 students stay home from school because they are afraid of being bullied (Vail 1999).

What Is the Impact of Bullying on Targeted Students?

Bullying can have devastating effects on victims. As one middle-school student expressed it, "There is another kind of violence, and that is violence by talking. It can leave you hurting more than a cut with a knife. It can leave you bruised inside" (National Association of Attorneys General 2000).

Students who are targeted by bullies often have difficulty concentrating on their school work and their academic performance tends to be "marginal to poor" (Ballard and others 1999). Typically, bullied students feel anxious, and this anxiety may in turn produce a variety of physical or emotional ailments.

As noted above, rates of absenteeism are higher among victimized students than rates among their non-bullied peers, as are dropout rates. According to Nansel and colleagues (2001), "youth who are bullied generally show higher levels of insecurity, anxiety, depression, loneliness, unhappiness, physical and mental symptoms, and low self-esteem." When students are bullied on a regular basis, they may become depressed and despondent, even suicidal or homicidal. As a report by the National Association of Attorneys General notes, bullying "is a precursor to physical violence by its perpetrators and can trigger violence in its victims."

The psychological scars left by bullying often endure for years. Evidence indicates that "the feelings of isolation and the loss of self-esteem that victims experience seem to last into adulthood" (Clarke and Kiselica 1997). Studies have found a higher level of depression and lower self-esteem among formerly bullied individuals at age twenty-three, even though as adults these individuals were no more harassed or socially isolated than a control group (Nansel and others).

What Can Schools Do To Counteract Bullying?

According to Froschl and Gropper (1999), a written anti-bullying policy distributed to everyone in the school community can help to send the message that bullying incidents will be taken seriously. Of course, to be effective, the policy must have the support of school staff, and it must be fairly and consistently applied.

It is helpful for administrators to have accurate data about the nature and extent of the bullying problem in their school. One way of getting a handle on the incidence of bullying is to distribute surveys to students, school personnel, and parents (Colvin and others). If baseline data are collected, school personnel will be better able to judge whether any subsequent changes are actually making a difference.

Debra Pepler, director of the LaMarsh Centre for Research on Violence and Conflict Resolution at York University in Tornoto, suggests mapping a school's "hot spots" for bullying incidents (Ruth Walker 2001). Once problematic locations have been pinpointed through survey responses

or a review of disciplinary records, supervision can be concentrated where it is most needed.

Barone also points out that providing better supervision is not necessarily costly. For example, principals can ask teachers to stand in the doorways of their classrooms during passing time so that the halls are well supervised.

To achieve permanent changes in how students interact, Colvin and others recommend not only delivering negative consequences to those who bully, but teaching positive behavior through modeling, coaching, prompting, praise, and other forms of reinforcement. Similarly, Ballard and others encourage schools to take a proactive stance by implementing programs that teach students "social skills, conflict resolution, anger management, and character education."

Dorothy Espelage, an assistant professor at the University of Illinois who coauthored a study on bullies, says, "We need to change the climate so that most kids feel it's inappropriate to tease and harass" (Labi 2001). Similarly, one 15-year-old girl said, "I don't know how you do this, but we need to make acceptance cool" (National Association of Attorneys General).

At Central York Middle School in Pennsylvania, all students sign anti-teasing pledges and are taught how to appropriately manager their anger. Since thi s practices was started, the school reports a reduction in fistfights. At Laurel Elementary in Fort Collins, Colorado, students undergo "Be Cool" training in which counselors present them with provocative situations and help them recognize the difference between a "hot response" and a "cool response" (Labi).

How Can Peers Discourage Bullying?

O'Connell and others (1999) assert that "peers may actively or passively reinforce the aggressive behaviors of bullies through their attention and engagement.... Peer presence is positively related to the persistence of bullying episodes." Similarly, psychologist Peter Fonagy says, "The whole drama is supported by the bystander. The theater can't take place if there's no audience" (Labi 2001).

According to Salmivall (1999), bullying is increasingly viewed as a "group phenomenon" and intervention approaches should be directed toward witnesses as well as direct participants. Salmivall encourages the development of anti-bullying attitudes among peers through awareness-raising, the opportunity for self-reflection and awakening feelings of responsibility, and role-playing or rehearsing new behaviors.

To discourage peers from acting as an "audience" to bullying behavior, Seeds University Elementary School (UES) in Los Angeles has a policy of sending bystanders as well as bullies for after-school mediation. Students and their parents sign contracts at the beginning of the school year acknowledging they understand it is unacceptable to ridicule, taunt, or attempt to hurt other students (Labi). If an incident occurs, it is used as a "teachable moment," an opportunity to educate students about alternate ways of resolving similar situations in the future (*UES Bridge* 2001).

Teaching respect and nonviolence should start in elementary school. Some suggest that nonviolence training conducted by older peers can be particularly powerful because, as one high school student put it, younger students "don't look up to old people; they look up to teenagers" (National Association of Attorneys General).

A survey administered by Naylor and Cowie (1999) found positive effects of peer-support systems designed to challenge bullying. Students accessing support, offered in the form of mentoring, befriending, mediation, and counseling, as well as their peers who provided the support, both derived benefits.

What Else Can Be Done?

Some states are beginning to require schools to adopt anti-bullying policies. Colorado, New Hampshire, and West Virginia recently passed legislation that makes it mandatory for schools to have anti-bullying policies. Massachusetts has allocated one million dollars to "bully-proof" its schools.

Students who bully often need intensive support or intervention so it is important for schools and social service agencies to work together. Perpetrators are frequently from "hostile family environments" (Ballard and others). They may be victims of acts of aggression at home, or witness aggression among other family members.

Parents can play a role in reducing bullying. William Pollack, a psychologist, says, "Research shows that the success of any program is 60% grounded in whether the same kinds of approaches are used at home" (Labi). When both parents and schools take an anti-bullying stance, the message may be more apt to be heeded.

If everyone works together to discourage bullying and respond to incidents, fertile conditions are created for students to develop a greater sense of connection to their peers and for seeds of respect and acceptance to grow.

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